

Reviews

Mariechen's self-knowledge

by Andrew Brink

Mary Berenson, A Self-Portrait from her Letters & Diaries. Edited by Barbara Strachey and Jayne Samuels. London: Victor Gollancz, 1983. Pp. 319; 49 photographs. £12.95.

BARBARA STRACHEY, AUTHOR of *Remarkable Relations* (1980), rightly thinks that our wish for greater depth of portrayal of the Pearsall Smith family is yet to be satisfied. In *Mary Berenson, A Self-Portrait*, edited by Barbara Strachey and Jayne Samuels, the Pearsall Smiths' eldest daughter Mary speaks for herself. Mary Berenson was a gifted correspondent and what she has to say is often remarkable both for its poignancy and its cultural significance. As wife and collaborator of the great scholar of Italian Renaissance art, Bernard Berenson, she has much to add to the history of culture. But it is for her own tangled life that Mary Berenson's posthumous epistolary narrative is most significant: there is much we had not known. *Mary Berenson, A Self-Portrait* overlaps and amplifies Chapters 6, 9 and 13 of *Remarkable Relations*, speaking for herself in elation and in despair, building empires in the world of art-dealing while the world of personal relationships disintegrates around her. The editors remain unobtrusive, letting Mary's voice intone its changes from girlhood to old age, from excited hope to disillusionment. They provide only the necessary informative links between and within the chapters of extracts from letters and diaries. The cumulative effect is powerful, making a documentary from which everyone interested in the rise of modernism and its personal consequences can learn.

The material is presented with informal ease, and the selection of extracts seems most apt and telling. This is not a scholarly edition, so the reader must not look for elaborate apparatus or for a full account of the diverse sources from which the selection was made, though ample information for the purpose is given. Emphasis is placed where it belongs: on the life and times of Mary Berenson, who is more than ample to fill the frame of reference and to perplex the reader with the enthusiasms and incongruities which made up her life.

A general comment may be permitted. Perhaps, for a family member such as Barbara Strachey, informal and uninterpreted “hands off” rendering is as it should be; yet lack of interpretation of such disturbing material is worrying. Perhaps wisely, Barbara Strachey leaves it to others to decide what this rich narrative may mean in terms of personality and culture. Do-it-yourself psychologizing is invited by reading of Mary Berenson's tumultuous life, but accurate psycho-social guidelines are yet to be established. We are still in a no-man's land of biography with little other than common sense to guide writer or reader. Nevertheless a phenomenology of relationships can be glimpsed in this and related records of such hard-driving makers of modern culture as the Berensons. We may observe that the often unhappy people in Mary Berenson's circle were obsessional in their relationships, and that they preyed on each other at least as much as they offered support and solace. To say this is not to detract from the brilliant careers of scholarly writing about Renaissance art by which the Berensons won international fame, nor should it diminish appreciation of the aesthetic revival of this art in large part promoted by their connoisseurship. Yet it is at the personal level that these records function with devastating accuracy—the raw materials from which any final account will come of how, in the name of art, traditional family bonds were ruptured to give way to the rampant individualism on display in these pages.

An interpretation would begin with Mary's tie to her powerful mother, Hannah Pearsall Smith, an apostate Quaker who won fame as an evangelical writer and preacher. This bond was more like a fusion of personalities, leaving ties to father and siblings of distinctly less importance. The fusion with Hannah was so nearly complete that it gave Mary an excessive concern with personal freedom from the usual moral constraints of society. Her early fascination with the rebel poet Walt Whitman, her preference for the exotic world of art scholarship and dealing in contrast to the staid enclave of Philadelphia Quakerism, together perhaps with her sexual nonconformity, may be attributed to a wish for emancipation from the mother she could not leave. Such a bold idea needs documentation of which the extracts give an abundance. Of the fierceness of her breakaway temperament, Mary writes to her father on 13 April 1885 when she was just twenty-one, that “It *must* be a painful awakening to find one's ‘swan’ hatched out into a hawk who is not content with sailing on the calm waters, but must needs swoop out into more dangerous untried elements ...” (p. 29). Mary supplies reasons enough for this aggressiveness.

The independent streak turns up early in a letter to her mother of 25 February 1885: “My dearest mother, thy letter this morning was very

lovely. I *will* try to be less savagely independent in the future....” (It is a pity not to have any example of the epistolary magic by which Hannah controlled her daughter.) On 20 January 1906 Mary confessed to her mother:

Thee is woven into the very closest texture of my inner life, and really I do not think an hour ever passes without my being in some way occupied with the thought and feeling of thee. And it is *always delightful*—how few children can say that of their parents! (P. 126)

The astute reader will guess that this might mean the opposite of what it says about the delightfulness of being mothered by Hannah Pearsall Smith. The probable resentment and hatred do not come out, as it is unlikely they would in a letter to the actual person. (Even Sylvia Plath, in a more emancipated era, reserved her hatred for the mother-figure in her novel, *The Bell Jar*, while the *Letters Home* enact the fawning compliance of a daughter with a mother to whom she is fused.) After her mother's death in 1911 Mary deputized her younger sister, Alys, to perform the function of receiver of compulsive news-giving: “I have decided to write to thee as if thee were Gram, and thee must take an interest in *everything*, all our woes and joys. I shall half think I am writing to her ...” (p. 173). She was convinced that even in death Hannah's personality was not gone, that it lived on to monitor her every thought and act.

In the critical area of religion—both parents had been evangelical preachers—Mary is remarkably reticent. There could be no compliance with Hannah's sometimes overheated Christian beliefs, even though late in life she herself developed a corrective scepticism toward evangelical excesses. Only once in the extracts is Mary heard to complain against her mother's Bible-centred narrowness: accompanying her on a rheumatism cure, claustrophobic feelings developed. “Her whole inner life—as far as thoughts go—and thoughts are what one speaks from—is built on the hideous ‘*subtilités d'un barbare*’ apropos of the Bible, and they drive me nearly crazy”, she wrote on 27 August 1899 (p. 83). For Mary “there is no way of getting God back again that I can see” (22 March 1912, p. 178), and only people formed her universe of meaning, but with what confusion we shall note. Praise of her mother's “eager indomitable soul striving to find Truth” (p. 286) does not disguise neglect of the central issue where they differed: her mother having hope in unseen divine help for human ills, while Mary saw it only in other people and, to some extent, in art. Having been to an exhibit of Moslem art, for instance, she writes, “It has been a real ‘unbuttoning’, Grandma, like some of thy sudden ‘openings’, and I am rejoicing over it” (7 Sept. 1910, p. 161). The attempt to

make aesthetic experience do service for a lost religion is not examined, nor is the irony that Renaissance art, studied by the secularized Berensons mainly as to form and technique, could hardly have existed without the system of belief still recognizable in her mother's life. Mary is not reflective in the ways that might be expected, but rather driving and domineering after her mother's own fashion in an altered frame of reference. Her rebellion against the tenets of a Quaker childhood thus reproduced its least desirable features in the vagaries of personality which had made Hannah herself a rebel in her day.

The test was marriage; in these pages we have the foreshadowing of widespread breakdown of loyalty in marriage. Hannah's marriage to Robert Pearsall Smith had early turned sour and ceased to exist in any real way after his disgrace as a preacher who confused the holy spirit with carnal desire. Hannah came to hate men, a bad omen for her daughters. As is well known, Alys's marriage to Bertrand Russell ended in pathetic estrangement and later divorce, while Mary's to Frank Costelloe was eclipsed by the attraction to Berenson. After being freed by Costelloe's death, her second marriage all but foundered owing to Berenson's rages and the obsessive attractions they both had to other sexual partners. Her brother Logan was homosexual and did not marry. It might be thought that in such circumstances Mary would reflect on the sad fate of marriages, but she did not, nor did she reflect on the kind of mothering she had had as engendering the desire to control other people rather than enter into relationships of trusting mutuality. Like most of us in our perplexities, she was too close to her material to see it for what it was. Many of the book's most touching passages have to do with her futile search for "love" outside the marriage to Berenson, but also inside it because she could never leave him, nor could he leave her, however profoundly unhappy they were making each other.

Driven on her nameless quest, Mary appears to have been deficient in trust, just as the touchy, suspicious Berenson could not trust his colleagues among art dealers. Both were driven by a need for meaning through beauty, driven and complicated by a more basic mistrust of sexual and affiliative feelings. Inflated hopes and bitter disappointments characterized them both as they dealt with other people and with each other. Obsessive will-o-the-wisp attractions and aversions kept unsettling their lives as scholars and dealers in art. Mary's compulsion to confess lets us see behind the glamour to what life at I Tatti, their sumptuous villa near Florence, was really like. Not before the publication of this book had it been quite so clear, for instance, that Mary's dalliance in Paris in 1894 with Bertrand Russell, who was about to marry

her sister Alys, was only a small sample of her voraciousness for "love". (Ernest Samuels' *Bernard Berenson* (1979) prepares us for these further revelations.) Her "stations of the cross" in the heretical religion of love are worth a brief review.

On 13 February 1888 Mary wrote to her mother about her "ideal" marriage to the lawyer Frank Costelloe, the man by whom she was to have two gifted but neglected daughters. By the summer of 1890, however, she had become convinced that her destiny lay in the study of art with Bernard Berenson, and while the residual Quaker in her regretted his "leaving out [of life] the moral and social elements" (p. 44), the pursuit of art with Berenson seemed worth the loss. It was like a new religion, or at least the point of entry to a new religion of "relationships"; love of Berenson was ecstatic—"O love, love, love. What bliss to know I shall see thee in 45 hours" (p. 45). In explaining her marital conduct to her mother, Mary wrote: "Thee, who is such a rebel against orthodoxy in religion, cannot be surprised or shocked if I am a rebel against orthodoxy in conduct" (28 Sept. 1909, p. 47). Exactly, but Mary who enthuses about her great love could also hate (as her mother hated her father), so that the extracts portray an emotional see-saw with Berenson who was also deeply ambivalent in his amorous and erotic feelings. We hear in detail of their various affairs, the hopes and the collapses of hope in new love, of Mary's affair with the sculptor Hermann Obrist in 1894 and with Wilfred Blaydes in 1897. At the same time her loyalty was torn by her absent children back in England with their father, and through it all she faithfully wrote family letters trying to explain everything. Alternating between boredom and over-stimulation, Mary cultivated aesthetic young men at I Tatti—Geoffrey Scott and Cecil Pinsent, for instance. Marriage to Berenson became increasingly difficult: "It seems so flat to be merely friendly and devoted after romance ..." she wrote on 9 January 1908 (p. 144).

Berenson (who did not want children) had notable affairs with Bella de Costa Greene, librarian to Pierpont Morgan; with Lady Sybil Cutting; and in Paris with Baroness Gabrielle La Caze, an art collector and traveller. Preoccupied with her young men at I Tatti, for a time Mary tolerated her husband's amorous excursions, but eventually they caught up with her, causing a depression. These pages are the most painful in the book, telling of Mary's suicidal preoccupation in 1918 when, owing to Berenson's promiscuity, she saw herself as fat, old and rejected:

A real sting for me lurks in every single nice thing thee says to me, knowing how thee has got into the habit of using love's vocabulary to all and sundry. I

have done it myself God knows, in my day, but that seems a long time ago, and my beguiling old partner is *still* going on with it! (P. 221)

Once tolerant, Mary now hated Berenson's women, and his display of affection for Mme. La Caze prompted her to attempt suicide by throwing herself out of a window. From this point on, psychological suffering and ill health took a heavy toll, we suspect as a result of the life of "freedom" they had made together but which was proving contrary to the need for loyalty and trust. In desperation on 11 June 1918 she wrote:

Dearest Bernard. I can't, I just can't bear it if you go off to spend July with Mme La Caze. I have fought and fought all day, and tried to feel old and take on the passive spectator attitude of old age, but I can't do it, Bernard! I know it will kill me. It's devil's work to feel like this, but if you go off with her I shall kill myself and have it over. (P. 225)

We remember that the darkening interpersonal relationship was taking place amidst a continuing quest for ideal art, albeit increasingly reduced to the clash of the market-place as Berenson collaborated with Duveen, his international dealer. The Berensons were still facilitating Duveen's dealing in the world's great masterpieces and frequenting some of the most wealthy houses in Europe and America. The story as recorded is never sordid, but Mary's disillusionment and gradual emotional and physical debility are the motif on which the narrative ends. True, there is a kind of Stoic acceptance that settles over the accumulated bitterness, struggles for money and fear of old age. Also the remarkable Nicky Mariano steps in to brighten the gloom at I Tatti; but all in all Mary's quest empties of content, leaving the sense of exhausted futility with respect to the energy that has been expended. Art is not the answer, nor is sexual conquest: then what is?—other answers are not proposed.

What new light does this book cast on Russell in this phase of his history? One illumination is Mary's insightful comment on 26 August 1898 about her sister Alys's unsuitability for marriage to Russell: "I wonder if, *à la longue*, even Love can bridge over [the] fundamental differences between her and Bertie" (p. 77). This is not mere sisterly pique, although it is clear that Russell and Mary's attraction of November 1894 was still alive in 1897; by then, however, Mary was prudently discouraging it. Her remarks also confirm the deep temperamental accord between Russell and Berenson at least in the early years; as she wrote on 13 January 1903,

They seem so different, but really conversation between them amounts to one or other saying something and receiving the answer "Of course!" B.B. says

they agree too well to discuss much, except of course they can exchange views on historical matters and so on. The chief difference in attitude to life between them is that Bertie is much more philanthropic, believes more in the possibility of doing good to large masses of people. (P. 107)

But the First World War drove its wedge, and Berenson's dislike of pacifism, as it was exemplified especially by Adrian and Karin Stephen (Mary's daughter), implies a change in attitude to Russell also. Russell is certainly a principal actor in these pages, alive as only the freshness of letters and diary notations can render a living presence; the book will assist in making us think again about him too.

On 27 December 1915 Mary wrote in her diary:

I am well over 50 and I don't know yet *how to live* in any sense, physically, as to my body, or materially, as to the use of wealth, or socially as to the kind and amount of companionship I want, or morally—as to anything at all!—or emotionally, as to what to care for and how much. (P. 207)

The reader who knows Mary Berenson from *Remarkable Relations*, or from the various biographical studies of the Pearsall Smiths and Berenson, may be shocked to realize the cogency of this statement. If taken for what it says, the statement undermines the belief that the pursuit of high culture is a good secular substitute for lost religion. On reading these confessions of the inner self, filled with references to the honoured makers of modern literary and artistic culture, from Tennyson to Henry James, from Giovanni Morelli to Roger Fry, we wonder whether the Berensons' phase of the aesthetic movement was not a wrong turning. The chronicle of loss of religion, of disintegration of family, of disrupted children and the broken succession of the generations, to be replaced by the illusion of beauty for itself, gives an answer of kinds. Was it all "imaginary" as she says of B.B.'s love for Belle Greene, an escapist fantasy of reliving an imaginary princely Renaissance but with real worldly power and glory? If so, there was plenty of support among the monied, culture-hungry patrons of the times for this kind of unreality. But the pursuit of art masked something else which has become much plainer now as the struggle for sexual conquest, if not fulfilment, dominates our culture. For the Berensons the human outcome of their lives is so disappointing that we may wonder whether the modern cult of suicide among artists and writers is not largely explained by the sorts of factors Mary's confessions reveal. Having read her pages, who would want to claim her as a prophet to be guided by? She was not a feminist, nor a pacifist; in fact she had no social or political programme at all, but lived for the senses and for money. She was indeed emancipated, but for what?

Her confusion and misery, ironically accented by the glories of art, were too much to bear, and it seems doubtful that a viable, on-going civilization could be built on assumptions and deeds such as hers. Perhaps as biographers interpret records such as those of Mary Berenson, and as those interpretations become more exacting, we will begin to be more certain of what true civilization means. It cannot mean the pursuit of art alone.

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